



## OUTDOOR RECREATION, FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE RESOURCES WHITE PAPER

*Note:* The following information is provided to help inform discussions at the Summit. Please understand, however, that this is not meant to be an exhaustive discussion of this natural resource, nor is it meant to confine your discussions at the Summit. Please bring your own knowledge, expertise, creative ideas and suggestions to the table!

### **WILDLIFE AND RECREATION: IMPORTANT TO CITIZENS AND OUR ECONOMY**

Virginia citizens and visitors place great value on our rich array of wildlife, fisheries and recreational assets. Our natural and cultural resources provide the chance to visit some of the most historically significant places in our nation; opportunities to continue the traditions of hunting, fishing and boating; the ability for watermen to make a living harvesting the bounty of the Chesapeake Bay; beautiful landscapes that can be enjoyed on a bicycle, on foot or through a drive in the country; world-renowned bird watching sites, and much more. Together, the Departments of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF), Historic Resources (DHR), and the Marine Resources Commission (MRC) work to protect these resources and ensure that future generations of Virginians can share in their benefits.

*The Virginia Outdoors Plan*, updated approximately every five years, is a federally-mandated plan for conservation, outdoor recreation and open space. DCR and other Natural Resources agencies are currently working on a plan for 2007. It will address three areas identified as important through public participation and the results of the 2006 Virginia Outdoors Survey: outdoor recreation, land conservation and green infrastructure.

The Outdoors Survey affirmed the importance Virginians place on our natural and cultural resources. Some key results include:

- Ninety-two percent of Virginians feel it is important or very important to have access to outdoor recreation opportunities;
- The top three desired outdoor recreational opportunities in Virginia are public access to state waters for boating, fishing, swimming and beach use; trails for walking, bicycling, and hiking; and public access to parks and natural areas;
- Ninety-four percent of Virginians feel it is important or very important to protect Virginia's open space resources;
- Seventy-eight percent of Virginians feel the state should use public funds to acquire and protect significant resource lands.

The Survey also provided insight into the economic importance of natural resources and the recreation they provide. Travel is among Virginia's top industries, generating more than \$13 billion a year in revenue and ranking as the third largest employer. Travelers visit Virginia mainly for its heritage which is reflected in historic buildings, historic sites and battlefields. Virginia's 275 historic attractions boast more than 6.5 million visits annually while 34 state parks entertain more than 7 million visitors annually.

Another big moneymaker for Virginia is its population of more than 1.1 million anglers who generate half a billion dollars in expenditures. As many as 80 different species are landed on Virginia's shores by commercial and recreational fishermen. Commercial fisheries employ more than 20,000 fishermen and contribute more than one billion dollars to Virginia's economy. Additionally, 355,000 hunters spent 5.8 million days hunting with more than \$320 million in total expenditures. Visitors and Virginians alike participate in wildlife-watching activities, with 8.9 million days of activity and nearly \$800 million dollars in total expenditures. Collectively in Virginia, hunting, recreational fishing and wildlife-watching involved approximately four million participants, nearly 29 million days of activity, and more than \$1.6 billion in expenditures.

## **ISSUES AND TRENDS**

### **Hunting and Fisheries**

According the 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, the estimated number of hunters in Virginia has declined from 402,000 in 1991 to 355,000 in 2001. Nevertheless, hunting is a longstanding tradition for many Virginia families, and hunters are often passionate about the opportunities Virginia's outdoors have to offer. The Department of Game and Inland Fisheries manages hunting and game populations through hunting licenses and bag limits. DGIF also provides many services to Virginia hunters, such as hunter safety education programs and the new "Find Game" feature on its website, which is an interactive map viewer that provides information about hunting land location and access. The Department manages freshwater recreational fisheries through fishing licenses and creel and length limits. DGIF also stocks Virginia waters with game fish and owns and manages 32 public fishing lakes, which provide recreational opportunities throughout Virginia.

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission is charged with the management, conservation and restoration of Virginia's commercial and recreational fisheries located in the Chesapeake Bay and surrounding waters. Most of Virginia's marine fisheries are managed under state, interstate or federal fishery management plans which specify safe and sustainable levels of harvests. The plans also include specific stock monitoring requirements and law enforcement provisions. The Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act compels each coastal state to adopt the provisions of its management plans. Failure to fully implement or enforce the plans may result in a declaration of non-compliance and enforcement of a federal moratorium on fishing in the offending state. Marine fisheries affected by population declines, user conflicts or differences of opinion regarding proper management include menhaden, oysters and horseshoe crabs.

### **Land Management**

Virginia's state parks provide access to many of Virginia's rivers, streams and lakes, as well as the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean. State parks also have more than 285 developed trails representing 450 miles and counting. This year, as a result of the Parks and Natural Areas General Obligation Bond passed in 2002, DCR opened the most new facilities since the

beginning of the state park system in 1936. Projects funded under this \$119 million bond have already resulted in the acquisition of five state parks and 11 natural area preserves. The acquisitions have helped bring the total acreage managed by DCR to 115,000.

With approximately 200,000 acres of public access hunting and outdoor recreational lands, DGIF is the largest state government landowner in the Commonwealth. The 30 DGIF Wildlife Management Areas, ranging from 429 acres to nearly 34,000 acres, provide a rich variety of wildlife habitats for people to enjoy. DOF manages another 51,000 acres in state forests.

One of the key issues identified through the 2007 Virginia Outdoors Plan development process is the need for adequate funding to meet Virginia's outdoor recreation and open space needs. The Governor's land conservation initiative seeking 400,000 additional acres by 2010 will require the continued efforts of all resource agencies as well as legislative commitment of funds. When realized, the addition of 400,000 acres will provide a significant increase in outdoor recreational opportunity and resource protection.

### **Boating**

Overall, the demand for water-based recreational opportunities is increasing at a rate faster than the population is growing. However, the supply of publicly-owned access points has increased only slightly. Virginia has over 250,000 registered motorboats plus hundreds of thousands of non-powered boats that share 25,000 miles of fishable rivers and warm-water streams and 176,000 acres in lakes and ponds. DGIF operates 225 public boat landings, and provides other services to boaters such as boating safety education programs. In many areas, the public's ability to access and use the water has diminished as private waterfront development has closed sites traditionally available for local use and more demand is placed on our water resources.

### **Trails**

The demand for trails in Virginia has grown significantly. Walking for pleasure is the number one outdoor recreation activity in Virginia with 72% of the population participating. Jogging, bicycling and hiking are ranked in the top 15. Virginia has developed a number of abandoned rail lines as multipurpose trails, some of which exceed a million visitors each year. The state has a great opportunity to further enhance its trail system through completion of facilities on existing rail trails, conversion of other abandoned rail lines, and developing connector trails as part of a comprehensive state trail system. Funding and staffing resources are needed for this to reach its full potential and bring the associated health and economic benefits to the state.

## **PROTECTING DECLINING SPECIES OF WILDLIFE**

Virginia works hard to ensure its local wildlife population stays plentiful. The greatest challenge to wildlife resources continues to be habitat loss. The rapid development and use of land and water is resulting in declining habitat for most species. Better planning, preservation, protection and management are needed to insure wildlife for future generations. At the 2003 Governor's Natural Resources Leadership Summit, DGIF was asked to develop the Virginia Wildlife Action Plan. The Action Plan identifies 925 wildlife species and their habitats for conservation; problems facing wildlife and associated habitats; and actions needed to address these problems. Approximately 100 of the species included are officially designated as state and/or federally-listed endangered or threatened species.

Restoration of imperiled aquatic communities is among the DGIF's highest priorities. Virginia supports 81 species of freshwater mussels, with over 45 species in the upper Tennessee River tributaries of the Clinch, Powell, and Holston rivers. Nationwide, the U.S. mussel fauna has experienced drastic declines because of water pollution, dam construction, and exotic species introductions. Virginia harbors 31 federally or state listed species in the upper Tennessee drainage. Compared to similarly-sized watersheds throughout the country, the Clinch and Powell rivers are ranked first and third, respectively, for the greatest number of at-risk fish and mussel species. Established in 1998, the Department's Aquatic Wildlife Conservation Center was founded to address this priority, and now is nationally recognized as a premier freshwater mussel propagation center. Over the last five years nearly 700,000 juvenile mussels have been produced at the AWCC with 180,000 released into six designated augmentation reaches of the Clinch, Powell, and Holston rivers.

Recently, the combined efforts of DGIF and VMRC led to complete recovery and restoration of coastal striped bass, and currently, restoration work is underway for American shad. This year, DGIF completed the first eradication of an established zebra mussel population that could have led to hundreds of millions of dollars in damage and repairs.

DCR's Division of Natural Heritage conducts an ongoing biological inventory, documenting the location and ecological status of rare plant and animal species and natural communities. Inventory efforts focus on globally rare species and communities. The information collected is used to review impacts on natural heritage resources of individual projects (3000+ requests per year) submitted by landowners, private consultants, and local, state, and federal agencies. DCR also uses this information to identify priority sites for land conservation, such as the 46 state natural area preserves that DCR owns and manages. Recently, the DCR Division of Natural Heritage received the Outstanding Conservation Impact Award from NatureServe, an international network of natural heritage programs.

## **ECOTOURISM**

Ecotourism, one of the newer and rapidly expanding components of Virginia's \$13 billion tourism industry, is described as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." It usually involves guided or directed tours to fragile, pristine and protected areas. DGIF recently completed the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail, the first statewide wildlife viewing trail in the country. The trail consists of 670 sites organized into 65 travel "loops," that provide increased opportunities for Virginians and visitors to enjoy the Commonwealth's rich and diverse wildlife resources. Similar major steps forward include John Smith's Adventures on the James Water Trail and the annual Eastern Shore Birding Festival. However, the state has yet to fully capitalize on its many natural, historic and cultural resources.

## **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

- What is our vision to ensure that our populations of fresh and saltwater fish species and diverse wildlife populations continue as vital assets for future generations of Virginians?
- How do we ensure that Virginia will be able to provide the quality and quantity of outdoor recreational opportunities that its citizens and visitors expect and demand?

- What information or incentives are needed to encourage development of outdoor recreational opportunities?
- How can we measure success? How will we know that we are making progress towards achieving these goals for outdoor recreation?
- How can Virginia better promote ecotourism throughout the state?

<b>NOTES:</b>
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